

EXHIBITION REVIEW

“War Torn:

Wing Luke Museum Dissects nature of violence in women’s lives”

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“Women and Violence” the current display at the Wing Luke Asian Art Museum directly takes on a burning contemporary issue with multimedia displays that directly engage the viewer on several levels. You cannot visit an exhibition at the Wing Luke Asian Museum and remain a passive uninvolved viewer.

The subtitle “Every 9 seconds a woman is beaten in the United States” presents the urgency of the subject.

At the entrance though, is another quote

“A woman’s freedom is the measure of freedom and humanity in society. “ Azar Majedi, Head of Organization for Women’s Liberation in Iran

The pairing of raw, painful information with uplifting and empowering acts is the secret to the success of the Wing Luke show.

First of all, we are asked to put a stone in a glass jar if we know someone who has experienced domestic violence. The physical act of choosing a smooth stone from a full basket creates a physical sensation. The cold stone feels soothing, lying in our hand as we think about the fact that a stone can be a weapon, a game, or a source of healing. The sound of dropping it, in a pile of other stones, is a dull sound, compared to the sharpness of a single stone struck on a surface alone. It seems to be a metaphor for leaving isolation and joining a community. It connects us both with others who have suffered, and with the show.

Projected newspaper stories document violence against women who have been brought to the United States as mail order brides or indentured servants. Susana Remerata, a pregnant “pen-pal” bride had left her husband because he beat her. He shot and killed her along with two friends at the King County Courthouse on March 2, 1995.

As we read the stories, though, we listen to spoken word poetry” in honor of sisters, mothers, and grandmothers, daughters who are reclaiming their lives, bodies and history and shedding their silence.”

The show has eight themes, each of which could be an entire show. The themes are
History of Violence Against Women

Types of Violence on Women including Women as Sex Objects

Sexual Abuse

Exoticism and Servant hood

Stereotypes of Asian Women

Economic & Workplace Inequalities

Women and War

Each theme is presented with a mixture of text, object, sound, and image.

For history, the newspaper clippings present some recent history, and a timeline at the end of the show gives a longer overview. Women as sex objects, sexual abuse, exoticism, servant hood, and stereotypes of Asian woman are grouped together with a reference to Orientalism and Edward Said's thesis that Anglos project exoticism on women outside of Europe as a combination of sexuality, eroticism, and mystery.

Four dresses refer to a geisha girl, Madame Butterfly, a Hula girl and a mail order bride, but there is also a full wall of Hollywood posters of exotic leads and steamy titles. The intersection of these themes works. Madame Butterfly was the Eurocentric projection of an Asian woman destroyed by her love of a European man. Later called "Miss Saigon" on Broadway it was updated by American entertainment industries and moved from Japan to Vietnam. Geisha girls, recently written about by a woman who was trained as a Geisha, are a much more complex cultural construction, but basically these women's skills were for the entertainment of men for money. The hula girl entertains Anglo tourists with the cliché of a seductive woman with bared breasts, and finally, the mail order bride, here the white dress is imaginary with its stamps and letters, is the child of an impoverished family sold to an American man based on her face.

Human Trafficking, an escalating worldwide problem is also highlighted with texts and statistics. Only this week in the newspaper, a story of a woman lured here as a domestic servant and held virtually as a prisoner detailed human trafficking.

Inequalities in the Workplace asks if we knew of anyone who had experienced sexual harassment at work. The jar was overflowing with stones. Again. just adding to the stones relieves some of the pressure of isolation.

Finally Women and War uses My Lai as an example with a newspaper clipping. That subject is definitely the area that could have been an entire exhibition, but all of these themes have a common root cause in violence spurred by racism. During World War II Philippine women were "comfort women" for Japanese soldiers, while Japanese women played the same role for Americans. Violence against women in war is pervasive, under discussed and underrepresented, although rape is one of the oldest war crimes.

We all know that violence against women is perpetually promoted through media. Any time you turn on the television, you see one murdered woman after another on almost every crime show. Their battered bodies are shown over and over as police work to solve the crime. These battered women are usually middle class or working class women on television. They are not in a war zone or homeless. Occasionally, the internet can play a part, but the women are almost always beautiful white Anglo women.

Then there are the news shows which are almost entirely about violence against women. In this country women are trapped more often by poverty, fear, and sexist stereotypes

than by drugged up gun toting soldiers -although policemen are starting to be exposed for their violent domestic lives.

We export violence and oppression around the globe and enable local violence to escalate. In Iraq, for example, women are trapped between the US military aggressions and the violence of the Iraqi insurgents. There are no records of the rapes of Iraqi women during this war, as there rarely is in any war. In the current constitution process women are being stripped of the rights and protections which they have had for decades under the fraud of the spreading of “democracy”.

Starting the exhibition with a quote from the Azar Majedi, the head of the Organization for Women’s Liberation in Iran underscores the fact that the solution is for women of all backgrounds to come together and resist the violence as well as its root causes in capitalism and fanaticism.

In the last room at Wing Luke, we can view videos which present performances by spoken word artists. They declare their power and their refusal to succumb:

“We see through, servant, mother, maid, mistress”
“Today we dare to speak our minds”

In the same room resources in multiple languages are offered with brochures and phone numbers for groups such as the Refugee Women’s Alliance (206 721 0243).